

PRESCHOOL LITERATURE IN HOMES
OF NURSERY SCHOOL CHILDREN

by

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INTRODUCTION

Books for preschool children are gradually being given a place of importance in the family bookcase. What books are recommended for preschool children? Where can parents secure these books? Why is it important to develop desirable attitudes toward books in the preschool years? Parents are eager for answers to these questions concerning children's literature

Many changes have occurred in the development of books for children. Mahoney and Whitney (8) stated, "In the history of the book, books for children appear very late." They mentioned that the expensive hand-lettered books of the Middle Ages, with the exception of a few books of instruction, were not made for children.

After the invention of the printing press in England in 1477 children's books began to appear slowly and by 1700 Aesop's Fables and other stories with a moral were published for children. According to Mahoney and Whitney, "The Puritan influence cast its stern and gloomy shadow over what little literature there was for children through the 1600's and the first half of the 1700's. ...The middle of the 1700's marks the first milestone in the making

of books to give joy to children." Before this time books were written to instruct or to point a moral. About books in the 18th century Mahoney and Whitney said, "Now came a recognition of the power of imagination and the importance of cultivating it in children. Fairy tales came to have a respectable place." With the increase in books for the child's enjoyment "...came a corresponding development in the illustrating and the make-up of them." In the 19th century particular attention was given to the essentials of a child's story. "The qualities that gave strength, fineness, and permanence to the children's books of this period were those that gave strength, fineness, and permanence to any book for young or old any time, anywhere---sincerity, understanding, vision and excellence of writing."

With the increase in the number of desirable books came a flood of undesirable books for children. As undesirable books Terman and Lima (14) designated "(1) books that are merely worthless; and (2) books that are directly harmful."

Gray and Munroe (5) reported a study done by Donovan in the Kroch International Book Store and Marshall Field's book department. They had given his comments as follows:

"The sale of children's books is increasing more rapidly than the sale of adult literature. The character of the books demanded appears to be of a higher order than formerly."

A marked increase in the number of children's books published in the last ten years has been observed. Among the preschool books of the present day are beautifully illustrated and carefully written stories as well as worthless and harmful literature.

Baruch (3) emphasized that "First experiences with books are important. We want children to be eager and receptive, not to shove books off with an attitude that they are boring."

Several studies have been made in the field of literature for preschool children to ascertain the kind of stories most suitable at this age. Miller (10) presented a selected list of 56 stories to preschool children, recorded the reactions of the children and evaluated the relative desirability of these stories for the preschool years. Some responses of preschool children to imaginative and realistic stories were recorded by Barker (2). She found that three to five-year-old children showed more interest in realistic stories than imaginative stories. Spencer (13)

extended the work done by Barker and found her own fanciful stories more popular with preschool children than were her realistic stories. Acheson (1) also tested the popularity of a group of original stories for children. Mantor (9) worked out an objective method for recording three and four-year-old children's enjoyment of stories and found the responses to fanciful stories not significantly different from the responses to realistic stories. Lack (7) undertook a study of the observable responses of two-year-old children's interests in stories and concluded that two-year-old children are discriminative in their story preferences.

Nursery school teachers have been impressed by the wide individual differences in preschool children's responses to books and stories upon their entrance into nursery school. Since interest in literature is so largely encouraged or discouraged by the child's first experiences with books in his own home it is important to know what these experiences are.

The recent development of nursery schools for the underprivileged child and the parent education in connection with these nursery schools has increased the need for more knowledge about the preschool child's experiences with

books in the homes. Besides the importance of knowing the extent of preschool literature in homes and the child's experiences at home with literature, it is of interest to compare these factors in homes having higher incomes with those having lower incomes. The purpose of this study was to ascertain what kinds of books were available to children in two groups of homes and to find what experiences they had with these books.

PROCEDURE

Data were collected in 60 homes in Manhattan, Kansas, a town with a population of approximately 11,000. Manhattan is located in the eastern half of Kansas in the center of an agricultural region. The town is largely made up of families employed by the college and of business concerns that serve these families. The college enrollment consists of nearly 4000 students, many of whom grew up on Kansas farms and in small towns of Kansas. Thirty of the families had preschool children who were attending or had attended the Kansas State College nursery school. This nursery school was conducted by a trained staff and served as a laboratory for college students who studied the development of the children. The other 30 families had pre-

had experienced a train ride, three a bus ride, two a boat trip and one an aeroplane ride.

In all but two of the homes the child used the adult's magazines for the picture content. In all but four homes the child looked at the comic strips in the newspapers.

Table 1 shows that most of the mothers remembered fanciful stories as their childhood favorites yet the books they read first to their children were Mother Goose rhymes.

Table 1. Kind of stories which mothers remembered as favorites at preschool age and the kind of stories first read to the child.

	No. of 'fanciful' 'stories	No. of 'realistic' 'stories	No. of 'Mother Goose' 'rhymes	No. of 'religious' 'stories
Mother's favorite stories at pre-school age	32	5	10	1
First stories read to the child	16	3	23	1

Child's Responses to Books. Twenty-eight of the children respected their books and only two were quite destructive. The children did not ask for stories at any regular time. Only one mother stated that her child never asked for a story. Twenty-five children dramatized some of the stories with which they were familiar.

Table 2 shows that the children's favorite stories tended to be fanciful. Those they memorized were fanciful stories and Mother Goose rhymes.

Table 2. Kind of children's favorite stories and those they could repeat from memory.

	No. of 'fanciful' 'Stories'	No. of realistic stories	No. of Mother Goose rhymes	No. of religious stories
Children's favorite stories	59	18	28	8
Stories children can repeat from memory	48	0	11	0

Mother Goose is still a favorite of young children but some mothers listed Stevenson, Longfellow, Riley and Milne among favorites as authors of children's poetry.

Preschool Books Found in Homes. The desirable preschool books found in the homes ranged from two to 57 books. The number of undesirable preschool books ranged from none to 13 books.

Table 3 shows fanciful books ranking highest in the kinds of preschool books found in the 30 homes of the college nursery school children. This is interesting because the recent trend in recommending books for preschool children has been toward realistic stories. Nearly 17 per-

cent of the books found in the 30 homes were classed as undesirable. This group included many inexpensive books with poorly drawn, grotesque illustrations and literary content which was worthless. This may show that parents buy an inexpensive book without much thought of its literary merit while more expensive books are carefully selected. Few of these undesirable books were definitely harmful as most of the harmful books were classed as too advanced and were not included here. No foreign books for preschool children were found in any of the homes which is of significance because of the large number of beautifully illustrated foreign books for children published in the last few years.

The data concerning the money spent for preschool books were incomplete as the mothers did not know the prices paid for books purchased several years before or for books given to the child. Out of the total of 640 books, prices were obtained for 369. Seventy-two percent of the books priced were ten-cent books. Table 4 shows the number of the books priced excluding ten-cent books and the average price paid for these books. The average price for more expensive Mother Goose books, picture books, collections of stories, religious books and books of poems ranged from \$1.17 to \$1.32.

Table 3. Kinds of preschool books found in 30 homes.

	Number of books	Percentage of books
Fanciful stories	162	25.3
Realistic stories	76	11.9
Mother Goose rhymes	76	11.9
Picture books	55	8.6
Song books	31	4.9
Poetry	30	4.7
Religious stories	26	4.1
Alphabet books	26	4.1
Holiday stories	23	3.5
Collections of stories	21	3.2
Foreign literature	0	0.0
Sets of books	7	1.0
Undesirable books	107	16.8
Total	640	100.0

The prices of recommended books were found to be far above those which the children had in their homes. For example, the average price of picture books (excluding ten-cent books) in one list recommended by the Child Study Association of America (Naumburg, 12) was \$2.00.

Table 4. The number of books priced excluding ten-cent books in 30 homes and average price of these books.

	Number of 'books priced'	Total price	Average price
Mother Goose	17	\$17.35	\$1.32
Picture books	4	5.25	1.31
Alphabet books	2	.85	.42
Realistic stories	20	18.82	.94
Fanciful stories	34	30.00	.88
Collections of stories	7	9.45	1.20
Holiday stories	1	.25	.25
Religious books	6	7.89	1.31
Books of poetry	11	12.85	1.17
Song books	4	3.00	.75
Total	106	\$104.71	.98

The price paid for sets of books (seven sets in all) was high, ranging from \$43 to \$69. As some sets included stories for all ages and one set included books for the parent on child guidance, these prices were not included in the prices given for the other preschool books. The families owned one or more sets of books in six of the homes. Two families owned "My Bookhouse," one, "Book

Trails," one, "Source Book," one, "Book of Knowledge" and two owned the "Child Craft" set. The mothers varied in their attitude toward sets of books. One mother thought "My Bookhouse" provided adequate literature for her preschool child while two other mothers had a large supply of books to supplement their sets of books.

Among the books used by the preschool children an average of one and one-half books per home was considered too advanced. Included in this group were many of those stories made popular by recent moving pictures such as "The Wizard of Oz," "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," "Gulliver's Travels" and "Pinocchio."

In the eight homes where the preschool child had older brothers or sisters several factors were observed. The preschool child had access to more advanced books than did those in the other homes. It was difficult for the mother to state exactly when she first started reading to the preschool child as this child has often listened to stories read to an older child in the family. It was also difficult to determine how long the preschool child was read to when he listened to stories read to an older child. Some of the child's favorite stories listed were considered far too advanced.

The number of color books, tracing books and cut-out books for preschool children varied from none to 26 in the homes.

Only seven homes had subscribed to children's magazines. They were receiving either the Jack and Jill magazine or Children's Activities or both.

The percentage of books given to the child as gifts was slightly greater than the percentage bought for the child by the parents. Most of the collections of stories were given to the child which may show that when people select gifts they get all they can for the money and choose a book which can be read longer than could a story book which contained only one story.

The W.P.A. Nursery School Group

In the W.P.A. nursery school group the average age of the fathers was 34.1 years and the average of the mothers was 28.9 years. There were 34 preschool children and 66 other children in these 30 families, 12 under two years of age and 54 over six years of age.

- Relatives were living with the families in eight of the homes while the other 22 had no other members living with them. Four of the homes were broken by the death of

one of the parents, by divorce or by desertion.

Occupation. Seven of the fathers were laborers, five were employed by the W.P.A., four were janitors, two, helpers to carpenters, two, section-hands, two, stone masons, one, a taxi driver, one, a foreman at the newspaper office, one, a tinner, one, a soldier and one was unemployed. In this group, six of the mothers were working at full-time positions, two with the W.P.A., two at cafes, one at the newspaper office and one was employed as maid in a home.

Yearly income. Eighteen of the families received a yearly income which was less than \$500 and 12 received an income ranging between \$500 and \$1000.

Education of parents. Three of the fathers had completed some college work, seven were high school graduates, eight had started to high school but had not finished, seven were eighth grade graduates and the education of two fathers was unknown to the mothers. One mother had received two years of college training, nine were high school graduates, 13 had not completed their high school work, five had graduated from the eighth grade and one mother had only a seventh grade education.

Homes. Five of the families lived in the poorest kind of homes located in the outskirts of the town. Two of

these were one-room shacks, one housing a family of nine and the other a family of seven. Nine of the families were living in a house which housed two or three families, living separately. In one instance one family lived upstairs with one family on the first floor and a third family in the basement. Some of the other homes had a better appearance as they were located in a neighborhood of families having higher incomes, but the furnishings of these homes were extremely meager.

Experiences. Only one mother had ever had any work in the study of children's literature and this was one chapter in a high school course. Only five of the mothers ever attended a child study group. Three mothers stated that they often listened to radio talks on child care and 27 seldom or never listened.

When the mothers were asked if they and their husbands enjoyed reading, the mothers stated that four of the fathers did not care to read while the remainder of the mothers said that they and their husbands enjoyed reading.

Parent Practices Related to Children's Attitudes toward Books. The children who were read to experienced their first story at an age ranging from 18 months to three years and the average age was 25.6 months. Five mothers

said their child was never read to. Sixteen children were read to in the afternoon or evening if someone had time to read. Nine of the mothers reported their child was read to at any time, which meant occasionally, just on week ends when the brother or sister or father had time, or at Christmas time as two of these mothers reported. The children in 17 homes were read to by members other than the mother. In the homes when the children were read to, the length of time was from 10 to 60 minutes, the average time being 20 minutes.

In all but five of the homes someone sang to the children, but only two children ever listened to songs on the victrola.

Three of the children kept their books in a drawer which was shared by brothers and sisters and one child had his books in a bookcase with books belonging to others in the family.

Only five families ever obtained books from the public library. These were usually secured by older brothers or sisters and brought home to the preschool child.

One child occasionally attended another group story-hour than the one at nursery school and 17 out of 30 attended Sunday School.

Four children often listened to stories over the radio and 26 seldom or never listened.

Twenty of the children had experiences car trips out of Manhattan, five had been on a train, three on a bus, and two had had no travel experiences.

In 19 of the homes the children looked at the comic strips in newspapers and 23 children looked at pictures in magazines. Many of these newspapers and magazines were borrowed or given to the families so the experience with these was only occasional.

All of the stories listed by the mother as her favorites at nursery school age were fanciful. In 12 homes the first stories read to the child were fanciful.

Child's Responses to Books. Seven of the mothers reported their child never asked to be read to and the remaining children had no particular time at which they asked for a story. Fourteen of the children dramatized some of the stories. All but one of the children treated their books with respect.

All of the stories except one listed as the child's favorites were classified as fanciful. The stories which the children could repeat from memory were fanciful and Mother Goose. The only poems which the children knew were Mother Goose rhymes.

Preschool Books Found in the Homes. The very small number of books found in the 30 W.P.A. nursery school homes is shown in Table 5. In addition to these, eight color books were found. Five primers also were found which were classed as too advanced for preschool children. Twelve of the homes had no desirable books. The largest number of preschool books found in any home was 11 books.

Table 5. Kind and number of preschool books found in 30 W.P.A. nursery school homes.

	Number of books
Fanciful stories	20
Mother Goose	6
Picture books	4
Realistic stories	2
Alphabet books	1
Religious books	1
Books of poetry	1
Collections of stories	1
Holiday books	0
Undesirable books	7
Total	43
Average no.	1.4

Contrast in the Two Groups

The most outstanding difference found in the two groups was the number of preschool books found in the homes. The college nursery school homes averaged 21.3 preschool books per family while the W.P.A. nursery school homes averaged 1.4 preschool books. Forty percent of the W.P.A. homes had no desirable preschool books.

The parent practices related to children's attitudes toward books were far more desirable in the college nursery school group. They read the first stories to their children at an earlier age and continued reading to their children daily. The parents in the W.P.A. nursery school homes sometimes failed to read to their preschool children or read only occasionally throughout the week and sometimes only a few times a year.

Almost all of the children in the college nursery school group had shelves where they kept their books. They obtained more books from the public library.

The children in the college nursery school group were more responsive to stories, asking to be read to and dramatizing stories.

Little difference was found in the two groups as to

the time of day set aside to read to the children, their attendance in Sunday School, their travel experiences, or the kind of favorite stories of the children. Fanciful stories ranked the highest in both groups with undesirable books next.

The homes in which the children lived were decidedly different in the two groups. In the W.P.A. nursery school group there were larger families and younger parents with less education and much lower average yearly incomes. More of the mothers in this group were wage earners. All of the fathers were unskilled laborers. In the college nursery school group only two of the 30 fathers were unskilled laborers.

Preschool Books in the City Library and Stores

More books of realistic stories were found in the city library, as shown in Table 6, than those under the other classifications, while in the stores the number of realistic books and fanciful books was found to be nearly the same (Table 7). Picture books are few on the list in the city library (Table 6), but are at the top of the list of those found in the stores (Table 7).

Table 6. Kinds of preschool books in the city library.

	Number of books	Percentage of books
Realistic stories	32	43.2
Fanciful stories	19	25.7
Poetry	8	10.8
Alphabet books	5	6.8
Collections of stories	4	5.4
Mother Goose rhymes	3	4.1
Picture books	2	2.7
Religious stories	1	1.3
Foreign literature	0	0.0
Holiday stories	0	0.0
Total	74	100.0

Table 7. Kinds of preschool books in the stores.

	Number of books	Percentage of books
Picture books	33	9.0
Fanciful stories	33	9.0
Realistic stories	32	8.8
Mother Goose rhymes	24	6.6
Alphabet books	11	3.0
Poetry	9	2.5
Collections of stories	7	1.9
Holiday stories	6	1.6
Religious stories	3	0.8
Foreign literature	0	0.0
Undesirable books	208	56.8
Total	366	100.0

Table 8 shows the number of desirable books under each classification and the total number and percentage of desirable and undesirable books found in the stores and city library. There were 232 desirable books and 208 undesirable books. Those parents who do not take advantage of the library books or purchase books from the book stores no doubt have difficulty selecting desirable books for their children.

Table 8. Total number and percentage of desirable and undesirable preschool books available in the stores and city library.

	Books in variety stores		Books in department stores		Books in book stores		Books in city library	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Realistic stories	17	-	0	-	15	-	32	-
Fanciful stories	12	-	1	-	20	-	19	-
Poetry books	3	-	1	-	55	-	8	-
Alphabet books	4	-	0	-	7	-	5	-
Collections of stories	3	-	0	-	4	-	4	-
Mother Goose rhymes	6	-	0	-	18	-	3	-
Picture books	9	-	0	-	24	-	2	-
Religious books	1	-	0	-	2	-	1	-
Foreign books	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
Holiday stories	5	-	0	-	1	-	0	-
Total desirable books	60	34.9	2	4.8	96	85.4	74	100
Undesirable books	141	65.1	40	95.2	27	14.6	0	0
Total books	201	100.0	42	100.0	123	100.0	74	100

When the books in the stores and library were checked with four lists of recommended books (4, 6, 11, 12) only 6.8 percent of the books found in the stores and 17.5 percent in the library were on the lists of books recommended for preschool children. The reason for this low percentage of recommended books in the stores seems to be a greater demand for less expensive books for preschool children. The books on sale in the stores were much lower in average price than those recommended on the book lists. The average price of picture books for the stores was 36 cents while that of those on two recommended lists (6, 12) was \$1.65. Many of the books found in the library were considered desirable for preschool children for their literary value if part of the story was omitted. However, they were recommended only for older children on the book lists. When the available books of this study were compared with the list of recommended books the percentage recommended for preschool children was very low.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this study of books available to two groups of preschool children from 60 homes and the use made of the books the results were as follows:

College Nursery School Group.

1. The average age of the fathers was 34.7 years and the average of the mothers was 32.3 years. The average number of children was 1.7 per family. Twenty-eight of the fathers were in business or professions; 29 families received a yearly income over \$1000; all except two of the parents had graduated from high school, 35 had received a college degree and 10 had carried on advanced study.

2. In 30 college nursery school homes, 640 preschool books were found. The range of desirable preschool books was from two to 57. The number of undesirable preschool books ranged from none to 13 books. The average number of preschool books per family was 21.3.

3. Nearly 17 percent of the total preschool books were classed as undesirable from a literary, artistic or social standpoint.

4. There were 25.3 percent of these books classed as fanciful stories, 11.9 percent were realistic and 11.9 percent were Mother Goose rhymes.

5. Of the books priced (about one-half of the total), 72 percent were 10-cent books.

6. The prices of recommended books were found to be much higher than those which the children had in their homes.

7. Six families owned one or more sets of books ranging in price from \$43 to \$69.

8. The preschool children used an average of one and one-half books per home which were considered too advanced.

9. A slightly greater percentage of the total number of books were given to the child as gifts than were bought for the children by the parents.

10. The age at which the first stories were read to the child ranged from nine months to two and one-half years. The average age for the child's first story was 17.8 months.

11. In 26 homes the children looked at the comic strips in the newspapers.

12. Only one child listened often to stories over the radio.

13. Only two children ever attended any other group.

story hour besides the one at nursery school, although 16 children attended Sunday School.

14. Fifteen parents often or occasionally obtained preschool books from the public library.

15. In 26 out of 30 homes the child had a shelf where he kept his own books.

16. Twenty-nine of the mothers attended a child study group and 15 of the mothers listened to radio talks on child care.

17. Only seven of the mother had ever been given previous information about selecting or presenting children's literature.

W.P.A. Nursery School Group

1. The average age of the fathers was 34.1 years and the average age of the mothers was 28.9 years. The average number of children was 3.3 per family. All of the fathers were unskilled laborers and all received a yearly income under \$1000. Only five of the parents had continued their formal education after graduating from high school, while 36 of the parents had less than a high school education.

2. In the W.P.A. nursery school homes, a total of 43

books was found, an average of 1.4 preschool books per home. Forty percent of the homes had no desirable preschool books. The largest number of preschool books found in any homes was 11.

3. The age at which the first stories were read to the child ranged from 18 month to three years; the average age was 25.6 months.

4. In 19 homes the children looked at the comic strips in the newspapers.

5. Only four children listened to stories over the radio often.

6. Only one child ever attended any other group story hour besides the one at nursery school, although 17 children attended Sunday School.

7. Only five of the parents often or occasionally obtained preschool books from the public library.

8. Only four children had a place where they kept their own books.

9. Only one of the mothers had ever been given previous information about selecting or presenting children's literature.

10. Five of the mothers attended a child study group, and three of the mothers listened to radio talks on child care.

Preschool Books in City Library and Stores

1. A total of 74 preschool books was found in the city library, all of which were classed as desirable. Of these, 43.2 percent were realistic stories and 25.7 percent fanciful stories.

2. A total of 266 preschool books was found in the stores. Of these, 56.3 percent were classed as undesirable books for preschool children.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. The percentage of undesirable preschool books found in the homes in this group shows a definite need for parent education in selecting preschool literature.

2. Parents need to appreciate the importance of literature for preschool children through increasing their knowledge concerning children's books.

3. The high percentage of fanciful stories shows that parents need more information on the values of different kinds of stories for preschool children.

4. The fact that parents buy inexpensive preschool books shows a need for more carefully selected inexpensive books in the stores.

5. Parents need to be made aware of the number of desirable books in the public library which could be used for preschool children.

6. The desirable experiences with stories which preschool children have in the homes need to be increased to encourage a growing appreciation of literature. This is especially true of families living on low incomes where experiences with literature are meager.

7. This study shows a need for similar studies in other communities concerning the experiences of rural preschool children would be valuable.

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APPENDIX

Preliminary Letter to Mothers

Dear _____

In addition to assisting in the nursery school this year, I am planning to study preschool literature in the homes of nursery school children.

I would like to come to your home for an interview concerning your child's first experiences with books.

I would appreciate such an opportunity very much and hope that I may make a definite appointment with you in a few days.

Sincerely,

Checking List for Interview

I. Family HistoryFatherMother

Age _____

Occupation _____

Nationality _____

Race _____

Education

_____ years - Grade School _____ years

_____ years - High School _____ years

_____ years - College _____ years

Other children in the family:

Number of boys _____ Ages _____ Number of girls _____

Ages _____

Other members of the household _____

Yearly Income Range: (check)

Under \$500 _____ Between \$500-\$1000 _____

Between \$1000-\$2000 _____ Over \$2000 _____

List any courses you have had in the selection or pre-
sentation of children's reading material: _____

Do you attend a Child-Study group? Often _____

Occasionally _____ Never _____

Do you listen to radio talks on child care? Often _____

Occasionally _____ Never _____

Do you like to read books and magazines? _____

Does your husband like to read books and magazines? _____

Name books or stories that were favorites with you when
you were nursery school age. _____

II. Your child's experiences with literature

	Often _____	Occasion- ally _____	Never _____
Does he use books from a public library?	_____	_____	_____
Does he attend a group story hour other than nursery school?	_____	_____	_____
Does he listen to stories over the radio?	_____	_____	_____
Does he attend Sunday School?	_____	_____	_____
Does he dramatize stories?	_____	_____	_____
Does he respect books?	_____	_____	_____
Does he listen to songs on the victrola?	_____	_____	_____
Is he sung to?	_____	_____	_____

Please list stories that he likes best now: _____

Please list poems that he enjoys now: _____

Please list books that are favorites of his for the pictures only:

Please list any stories that he can repeat from memory.
Indicate whether he gives part or all of the story.

At what time of day does he ask for stories? _____

When do you read to him? _____

Who usually reads to him? Mother _____ Father _____ Brother _____

Sister _____ Other members of household _____

How long do they usually read? _____ minutes.

Does anyone tell stories to the child? _____

Does he help tell the story when you read to him?

What were the first stories read to him? _____

At what age were they read? _____

Does he have his own bookshelf? _____

Please list any unusual travel experiences he has had:
